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Friday, March 18, 1955

For The State's Higher Learning . . .

A Backward Step

The following item is quoted from the Minutes of the Board of Trustees meeting on February 17, 1955:

Campus Speakers All Institutions

After a thorough discussion of the importance of having all prospective speakers at college gatherings thoroughly investigated, the Board of Trustees unanimously adopted the following resolution which was submitted by Mr. Miller, and seconded by Mr. Tubb:

"All speakers invited to the campus of any of the State Institutions of Higher Learning must first be investigated and approved by the head of the institution involved and when invited the names of such speakers must be filed with the Executive Secretary of the Board of Trustees."

* * * *

The above is a memorandum to the faculty and staff from Chancellor J. D. Williams informing them of a recent resolution of the Board of Trustees.

As unbelievable as it may seem that a Board of Trustees of Institutions of Higher Learning would pass such a resolution, it has been passed and the University, as well as all the other institutions of higher learning in the state, is now operating under it.

The implications of this resolution are far-reaching. It means that every speaker coming to the University, whether on an ODK forum, as a religious emphasis speaker, a General Education Board lecturer, or a speaker to a fraternity group must have prior approval of the Chancellor, who must certify to the Board that an investigation has been made.

The Chancellor, of course, has always had final responsibility for whatever has gone on at the University, and this has included the responsibility for speakers. But heretofore he has not been ordered to screen potential speakers.

This resolution is disastrous to our institutions of higher learning in a number of ways.

First, it violates the very objects and purposes of the institutions, in that it is a grave intrusion on the fundamental constitutional guarantees of free speech and free inquiry, upon which the foundation for higher learning must rest.

This could be only an entering wedge, the beginning of thought control which may well lead to censorship of text books and eventually of what is taught in the class room. When and if this happens, the main reason for higher learning, the seeking after truth, has ceased to exist.

We quote from the University's new catalogue: "A University is a community of free men and women devoted to the preservation, increase, and application of knowledge. . . . Good learning increases, minds are creative, and knowledge is turned to useful purposes when men and women are free to question and seek for answers, free to learn, and free to teach. . . ."

Second, looking at the resolution from the University's standpoint, it will undoubtedly cause the University to lose a good deal of the prestige it has so painfully won in the last generation. This action will immeasurably lessen the chances of the University and the other institutions of ever getting a Phi Beta Kappa charter as well as other national recognition.

Third, much of the good work of our administrators has been endangered by the ruling.

And fourth, it will decrease the institution's chances of getting the best in educational lecturers and speakers. The investigation is an insult to the prestige and reputation of whatever speakers might be asked to appear. We feel that, knowing of the Board's resolution, many speakers will not consider appearing in Mississippi.

As a case in point, a recent news story from the University of Washington, where a prominent controversial public figure was banned, describes the refusal, on principle, of a speaker invited to appear. A Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist, who helped develop the atom bomb, wrote: "As long as this refusal (ban) stands, I myself would never accept any invitation to Seattle and I don't think any self-respecting physicist should do it."

According to the survey made at Mississippi Southern College, the majority of students intend to leave the state after graduation. Bright people will not tolerate a suppression of freedom of thought and they will go where they may have peace of mind.

It is rumored that the Board's action will not be enforced, that it is "just for the books," that there are "political pressures behind it."

Even if the ruling is enforced in a nominal way only, the total effect on the faculty and students may still be disastrous. There is fear abroad in the land today, fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of making honest inquiry into certain fields, fear of stating one's views. Courage in seeking the truth has given way to expediency.

There are people who say: "Sit tight and wait. The ruling will not be enforced." We ask these cautious people where to begin objecting? We ask them, shall we not object to the principle? Shall we wait and object to the action? Then, it will be too late.

Someone has said that "thought control is an indication that we don't really believe in our economic and political systems, that we don't believe they can

stand the light of free discussion."

If democracy is what we have been taught to believe, it will be able to stand the onslaughts of all the opposition. We believe in democracy and we believe the people will do the right thing when properly informed.

The only way they can be properly informed is to have absolute freedom of thought and discussion.

—Autry